



## The Times Misses the Mark — Again!

by Shekhar Deshpande

December 26, 1993 was a slow news day at the *New York Times*. It is the day after Christmas after all. A front page story, "U. S. Immigrants Make Christmas Their Very Own," was accompanied by a photograph of Tamil women singing Christmas carols at a Richmond Hill, Queens church. The story about U. S. immigrants continued inside with another photograph of the family of Ranjit Singh Janjua from Astoria, Queens. The photograph showed the family (including the young daughter) sitting around their Christmas tree. The reporter, David Firestone, and some readers are assumed to have been amused by the celebration of Christmas by non-Christian immigrants.

A quick, nationalistic and ethno/religio-centric remark to dismiss all of this hoopla is to gently tell the reporter that in India celebrating the festival of another religion is no big deal. The least we do is to get a day off from work and school on someone else's holiday. The most we do is actually celebrate it in our own way, because it is too much hassle not to have fun on all holidays and we are very tolerant of all religions, especially when it comes to their festivals. That response is quick and readymade. It

is hard to see how that could be a front page news story in *The Times of India*, a day after Divali, Christmas or Id.

But this is America and only in America are there explanations for such events, even on a slow news day. The story that purports to be about U.S. immigrants deals mostly with Indian families, and only marginally with a Buddhist minister of Korean descent and a Turkish Muslim in Jackson Heights.

But this is America and it is nice to see the process of assimilation going smoothly, particularly since that might please the Pat Buchanans in particular or middle America in general. The response that the Janjua family has for having a Christmas tree is very practical (although it is very complex on its own). The little girl likes to have the tree. May be peer pressure, may be just the way she likes the feeling of having a tree or whatever. The important point is that Mr. Janjua's make-up does not allow him to have hostility to Christmas trees, so he accommodates it in his worldview. That is the story here. It is not that some strange looking family, despite its religion and faith is accepting a religion that is so "American."

There is another story here that the reporter perhaps forgot. It is

not how Indians adopt Christmas with a generous attitude, but that mainstream America, despite its professed love for diversity and human rights, tolerates little by way of diversity. The real news would be the intolerance of Americans toward other religions and "other" appearances. That would make for a good thinking topic on a day when the euphoria generated by the shopping malls about what is a sacred day is fading out and there is some space and time to inject some serious thinking. It is too easy to pick some exotic looking immigrant group to show how Christmas is adopted by them as their own. The pressures there are different and complex and decisions practical and wise in many ways. But the same people, with the same looks (not the specific persons mentioned in the news story or the photographs) venture out to take part in other things American (job system, or social interaction, for example), and they are hit with discriminatory treatment.

What does that say about a society and culture which likes others to celebrate its holidays and holy days, but doesn't appreciate when others try to celebrate the system by wanting to take equal part in it? When will that be the front page story?